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THE ORTHODOX CHURCH: 455 QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

by
Stanley S. Harakas

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*A Concise and Comprehensive Handbook
on the Orthodox Faith*

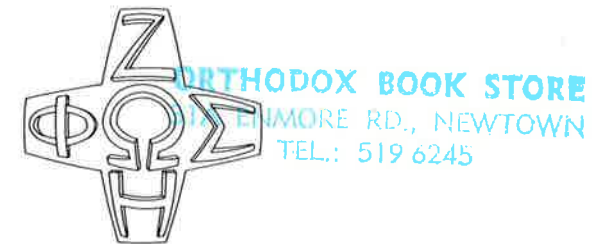
THE ORTHODOX CHURCH:

455 QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

By
Stanley Samuel Harakas

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Topically Indexed
By Nikki Stournaras



"In Him was life and the life was the light of men" (John 1:4).

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come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for edifying, as fits the occasion, that may impart grace to those who hear" (Ephesians 4:29). Certainly, you will agree that "S.O.B. language" neither edifies nor does it "impart grace" to those who hear. It is neither fitting nor appropriate language for persons who seek to serve God. Read Ephesians 4:31, also, for more on this.

TAMATA

- 431.** May we hear "more on tamata." That is, some Scripture references to the origin of the "tamata" tradition? J. K., Sioux Falls, SD.

The origin of the "tamata" tradition both historically and spiritually is the gratitude of Christians for blessings received from God through answered prayer. The "Tama" is a small metal (usually silver) replica of a physical organ such as a hand, arm, leg, or eye. When a person has been healed as a result of prayer, a "tama" may be placed in front of the icon of Christ or the Theotokos or the Saint whose intercessions have been requested. Sometimes there are strings of them in front of the icon. Thus, it is an appropriate way to express thanks to God: "In everything give thanks: for this is the will of Christ Jesus concerning you" (1 Thessalonians 5:18. See also Ephesians 5:20, Psalm 92:1). In connection with thanksgiving, the Bible also teaches us to witness to what God does for us: "O give thanks unto the Lord; call upon his name; make known his deeds among the people (1 Chronicles 16:8; Psalm 105:1). One way of doing this—though, of course, not the only way—is with the display of the "tama" in the church. Thus, these words of St. Paul said in another context are also applicable to the "tamata": "wherefore show ye to them, and before the churches, the proof of your love" (2 Corinthians 8:24).

THEOSIS

- 432.** According to Orthodox teaching, we are created in the image and likeness of God. If it is also true that we have nothing of His essence, how then are we to become "Gods" as the Bible teaches and the Church teaches in the doctrine regarding "Theosis?" G. D., Roslindale, MA.

I begin with a quote from Fr. Stavropoulos' book *Partakers of Divine Nature* which I translated a number of years ago:

In the Holy Scriptures, where God Himself speaks, we read of a unique call directed to us. God speaks to us human beings clearly and

directly and He says: "I said, 'You are gods, sons of the most high—all of you'" (Psalm 81:82 and John 10:34). . . . As human beings we each have this one, unique calling, to achieve Theosis. In other words, we are each destined to become a god; to be like God Himself, to be united with Him. The Apostle Peter describes with total clarity the purpose of life: we are to "become partakers of divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4).

There is an error in your question, however. We are not called to become "Gods." The capital "G" implies that we are to change from created, finite and limited beings into that kind of being which is uncreated, infinite, and eternal, that is, into divine beings. That cannot be the meaning of "Theosis." There is only one God. With a small "g," however, the scriptural and patristic meaning becomes clear. Our becoming "gods" really means "becoming God-like," that is, becoming once again what we were created to be originally, "the image and likeness of God," that is, becoming fully human. Thus, as Stavropoulos states:

Human nature becomes the outgrowth of divine nature. It is remade into its original beauty. It is reborn to a new life. It is re-created through divine adoption. St. Anastasios Sinaites says the following in a wonderful definition of Theosis: "Theosis is the elevation to what is better, but not the reduction of our nature to something less, nor is it an essential change of our human nature. A divine plan, it is the willing condescension of tremendous dimension by God, which He did for the salvation of others. That which is of God is that which has been lifted up to a greater glory, without its own nature being changed."

How is this accomplished? One way to answer that question simply is to say, "to fully and completely live the Christian life." Another way of saying the same thing is to say "to live in full communion with God." The same thing is meant when we say "to live our Orthodox Christian faith fully." Whatever the case, Christ expects that all those who follow Him may become sons and daughters of our Heavenly Father (Matthew 5:44). It is in this sense that St. Athanasios, in his book *Concerning the Incarnation of the Word*, said, "God became man, so that we might be made gods."

THEOTOKOS

- 433.** What virtues of the Theotokos should women imitate? P. B., Old Tappan, NJ.

Because the Theotokos, that is, Mary the mother of our Lord, is the first and chief among the saints, she is a model not only for women, but for all Christians: men, women, young people, hermits, monks, etc.

fact of God's choice of her to bear Jesus Christ, His Son, we learn some things about her. She was "full of grace" (keharitomene), the "Lord was with (her)" and she had "found favor with God" (Luke 1:28, 30). In order for her to have been chosen by God to be the human mother of Jesus Christ, she was a special person, in that she loved God, she was devoted in prayer and personal commitment to God and she lived in communion with Him. This is an example for each and every one of us. Further, she was and remained a virgin (Luke 27), that is she was morally pure. Those who are unmarried, as she was, should follow her example of purity; those who are married exercise their purity by remaining faithful and committed in all things to their spouses. When the angel told her at the Annunciation what was about to take place, she did not accept it blindly, but inquired so as to understand what God was doing and how it was to happen. Thus, she is an example to all, not of blind and unreasoning faith, but of a faith which engages the whole person, including the mind (Luke 1:31 - 35). She gives us, as well, the example of freely given acceptance and conformance to the will of God, when she responded to the angelic announcement with these words: "Behold, the handmaid of the Lord; be it to me according to thy word" (Luke 1:38). Together with her husband, Joseph, she followed the laws of the land when she went up to Bethlehem to be recorded for the tax. She thus showed herself to be a good citizen, even when it was particularly difficult and burdensome since the trip was undertaken during the last days of her pregnancy (Luke 2:4-6), an example for all of us, as citizens. As a parent, she cared for her child in a proper fashion (Luke 2:12), following the religious practices of her people as regards children (Luke 2:27-32). Mary and Joseph trained Jesus as they would have any child. During the episode at the Temple in Jerusalem when He was 12 years old, we see how Mary and Joseph involved Jesus in Church life. We also see an example of concerned parenthood in her. Mary went back to Jerusalem to find Jesus and when she found Him, she said "Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been looking for you anxiously" (Luke 2:48). Certainly an example of parental love. When they went home, we see another aspect of the Virgin's life. The Scripture tells us that "His mother kept all these things in her heart" (Luke 2:51), indicating that she also was reflective and meditative, seeking to find deeper meanings in the ordinary events of life. She was not a "surface person," but rather she connected daily events with God's will and purpose. Christians, thus, in the same way seek to "see sermons in stones" for their own lives. Later, at the Cross, Jesus' Mother showed courage and devotion (when even His disciples had abandoned Him) as she stayed near the Cross, an example of loyalty and commitment to the Lord in difficult, trying and unpopular moments (John 19:25). The Theotokos is truly an example for every Christian.

434. Can the Mother of God save us? P. B., Old Tappan, NJ.

The Bible and Holy Tradition clearly teach that there is one saving mediator between God and human beings, Jesus Christ: "God our Savior . . . desires all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Jesus Christ, who gave Himself as a ransom for all" (1 Timothy 2:4-6). The Creed, too, makes this clear: Christ, "for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven. . . ." So, it is Christ alone who is the Savior. But, we especially honor the role which was exercised by the Lord's mother, the Theotokos, in helping make this possible. God chose her to make Christ's Incarnation a reality. As the Creed continues: ". . . came down from heaven and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and was made man." She also intercedes for us at the heavenly Throne and serves as a protector. We may properly call on her to save us from dangers, illness and misfortune, through her intercessions. But it is Christ who is the bringer of eternal salvation to the world.

435. In many Orthodox services, the phrase "Yperaghia Theotoke, soson emas" (All Holy Theotokos, save us) is used. Some Orthodox use "Yperaghia Theotoke presveve yper emon" (All Holy Theotokos, intercede for us). Which is theologically more correct? D. P., Moline, IL.

Neither is "more correct." The first scandalizes some who think that it implies that the Church holds the Theotokos to be a co-savior with Christ. Nothing could be further from the truth. Christ is the only Savior and the only saving mediator between God and humanity. "There is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Jesus Christ who gave himself as a ransom for all" (1 Timothy 2:5-6, Read also 1 Corinthians 1:11-25). In this case, the word "soson" is used in the sense of the word "diasoson" which means "act to protect us," i.e. intercede for us before God's throne so that He may save us, and keep us from harm. In this sense whether we say "soson" or "presveve," it means the same thing. Liturgical language is not always doctrinally precise, since often it is poetic in character.

436. In the hymns of praise to Mary in the Akathist Hymn, it mentions how Moses foresaw the Nativity in his encounter with God in the burning bush. I have also seen an icon of the Theotokos of the "Burning Bush." What did Moses foresee regarding the Theotokos and the Nativity? E. N., Augusta, GA.

He, himself foresaw nothing, from the evidence in the Scriptures. However, in the "typological" method of biblical interpretation used frequently by the Fathers of the Church, the event of the "Burning Bush" which was not consumed by the flames takes on great importance. It

in this event that God revealed Himself to Moses in all His mystery and wonder (Exodus 3:13-15). It is not surprising that among other things, the Fathers of the Church saw in this holy event a symbol or "typos" of the miraculous virgin conception and birth of our Lord. Just as the bush remained unaffected by the flame, the Theotokos remained a Virgin, even though she gave birth to Jesus Christ. Many other Old Testament events are interpreted typologically in the hymns and icons of the Orthodox Church.

- 437.** Is it necessary for the Orthodox Church to honor the Virgin so much that some of the people seem to have more of a dedication to her than to Christ? J. H., Palmer, MA.

Your question puzzles me. There is nothing in the tradition of our Church which directs people to honor the Virgin Mary more than the honor due Christ. For example, in the Divine Liturgy continuous and frequent mention is made of the Holy Trinity, Father, *Son* and Holy Spirit. One of the hymns characteristically says "Save us, O Son of God, who did rise from the dead who sing to you, Alleluia." Or, read this hymn which is sung at every Divine Liturgy, which immediately follows: "Only-begotten Son and Word of God, being immortal, Thou humbled Thyself for our salvation, taking flesh by the holy Mother of God and ever-virgin Mary; Thou became man without change, and were crucified, thereby destroying death by death; being one of the Holy Trinity, together glorified with the Father and the Holy Spirit; save us, Christ our God." This hymn not only shows the centrality of Christ to the Orthodox Christian faith, but it also shows us why the Virgin Mary is important to us: she is the Mother of the Lord! For this she is due honor and great respect from Christians. Our honor of the Virgin Mary cannot exceed that which we give to Christ, precisely because it is on account of Christ, that we honor her. We Orthodox are faithful to the true Tradition of the Church when we place Christ first in our lives, but do not fail to fulfill the biblical expectations when we heed the Virgin Mary's words which are recorded in the Bible: "For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed" (Luke 1:48). Like Elizabeth, her kinswoman, when she was filled with the Holy Spirit, we cannot fail to say "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb" (Luke 1:42).

- 438.** Where does it say in the Bible we should pray to Mary—the mother of Christ? My husband's minister says that your practice is false. It is not giving "The Glory" to Christ. It also says in the Bible to beware of the traditions of men. Please explain fully, and give me a Bible verse where to pray to Mary. N. D. E., Belleair Beach, FL.

Your question goes to the heart of the differences between the Protestant and Orthodox Churches. The insistence on a Bible verse to

"prove a point," out of the context of the ongoing understanding of the Scripture in the Holy Tradition of the Church is a position which is purely Protestant. The most important thing to be noted from the Orthodox perspective is the fact that it is the Church which produced the New Testament—not the other way around. The Church existed for many years without any of the books of the New Testament. It was the disciples and others who came after them who wrote the books, but so did many others in the names of the Apostles. This meant that it was the Church which had to distinguish between what was validly the Scriptures and what was not. Church Fathers such as St. Gregory the Theologian and Amphilochios of Iconium and St. Athanasius clarified the lists of canonical books of the Bible well into the fourth century.

Also, the correct interpretation of the Scriptures is based on this living and conscious tradition of the Church. Many Protestants, for instance, accept as true, decisions of Church Councils which are precisely expressions of Holy Tradition. Where they do not, they not only are in disagreement with that tradition, but also among themselves. The almost 300 Protestant groups in this country are self-evident proofs that the Bible cannot be consistently understood properly outside the Holy Tradition of the Church which produced it. As for Mary, she is honored as the "Mother of our Lord" (Luke 1:43). She is "full of grace and the Lord is with her" (Luke 1:28). The Bible says "all generations will call her blessed" (Luke 1:48). If all this is true, and if it is true that we are "to pray for one another" and that "the prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects" (James 5:16), why should we not ask for the prayers of Mary who is "full of grace," "blessed," and that unique representative of the human race in Christ's Incarnation? This, of course, does not mean we cannot or ought not pray directly to Christ, or to the Father, or to the Holy Spirit. But nothing prohibits us—including the Bible—from asking for the intercessions of the Theotokos. And, as far as "glory" is concerned, who more than Mary, who gave birth to our Lord, and directed people to obey Christ (John 2:5) better fulfills this Biblical injunction?—"Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). It is the perpetual Tradition of the Church to honor our Lord's mother and to seek her intercessory prayer. Through it Christ is honored and glorified as well.

- 439.** Please explain the relationship of the Theotokos to Joseph and Christ's brothers. Also, why is there not much mention of Joseph? D. M. A., Canton, OH.

It is the teaching of the Church, based on the account of Matthew, Chapter 1, that Joseph was a protector of the Virgin Mary, that she remained a virgin all of her life, and that those persons referred to as Jesus' brothers are children of Joseph.

This view is held in the Eastern Orthodox Church and was first developed at length and defended by St. Epiphanius, Bishop of Salamis, who lived from 315-403. Joseph's role is not unimportant. He figures prominently in the two narratives about Jesus' infancy in Matthew 1-2 and Luke 1-2. He was a pious Jew of Davidic descent, and a carpenter (Matthew 13:55). In an apocryphal work, "The Protevangelium of James" he is described as being very old when betrothed to Mary. According to one authority, "The special veneration of St. Joseph seems to have originated in the East where the apocryphal 'History of Joseph the Carpenter' (4th-7th Centuries) enjoyed considerable popularity." It was not until 1479 that his name was included in the liturgical calendar in the Western Church. The Orthodox Church celebrates his memory on the Sunday after Christmas, but if the Sunday after Christmas does not fall from the 26th to the 31st of December, inclusively, it is celebrated on December 26. In our Church, St. Joseph is remembered and honored as the protector of both the Theotokos and the Christ-Child.

- 440.** It seems to me that the important thing to recognize and accept is that Jesus Christ was conceived by the Holy Spirit and therefore was the Son of God. The fact that Mary had a marital relationship with Joseph following the birth of Jesus does not in the least diminish the importance of Mary as the one chosen of God to be his vessel.

Here, perhaps, is the real misunderstanding. The magnitude of what is claimed about the birth of Jesus is too easily put aside by the view that Mary — after becoming the sacred vessel for the once-in-eternity event of the Incarnation of God — could simply return to an ordinary and common life-style without a sense of any contradiction or disjunction. Perhaps the whole traditional view is summarized in the words of the great 8th century Orthodox theologian St. John of Damascus: "How would it be possible for her to give birth to God and who from the experience of all that accompanied the miracle, condescend to enter into ordinary marriage relations with a man! Impossible! This is not the kind of idea that a correct reasoning person could even think, much less do." The too easy acceptance of both the Theotokos' role in the Incarnation and the idea that she could slide into a routine marital situation, can only mean that the tremendous significance of the Incarnation of the Second Person of the Holy Trinity has not been understood. In no way, however, can this be interpreted as a reduction of respect for marriage. In Orthodoxy not only is marriage a sacrament (while monasticism is not) but also married men are ordained to the priesthood. It has to do with the magnitude of the impact of the Incarnation upon the person of Mary herself and upon Joseph, himself. After all that God had done through Mary as recorded in the Scriptures, how could Joseph simply assume the role of an ordinary husband after Jesus' birth?

- 441.** I would like to comment on the explanation given recently in your column regarding the relationship of the Theotokos to Joseph as given in Matthew 1. In verse 18 it says "Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: when his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost." The phrase "before they came together" is very significant, I believe, as it indicates a husband and wife relationship.

There is no doubt that there was a special relationship of Joseph and Mary, the Theotokos, which can properly be called "a husband and wife relationship," in that Joseph formally took Mary to be his betrothed and his wife in the eyes of the Jewish society in which he lived. Thus, Joseph is referred to as the husband of Mary ("andra tes Marias"; Matthew 1:16) and the Virgin Mary is referred to as the wife of Joseph ("gynaika tou Iosef"; Matthew 1:20, 24). This relationship has always been affirmed in the history of the Church. Concurrently, however, it has always been affirmed in the history of the Church that the Theotokos remained a virgin both before and after the birth of Jesus.

The first mention of persons in the Eastern part of the Church who held the position that the Virgin Mary in fact had sexual relations as a wife with Joseph occurs in the fourth century, when St. Epiphanius, Bishop of Salamis, condemned such a teaching as false in his book, "Refutation of all the Heresies." In the Western part of the Church this view was repeated by Helvidius at about the same time, and refuted by Jerome, one of the Fathers of the early Church.

Helvidius' purpose was to defend the sanctity of marriage against the exaltation of virginity in the Church. Since then, Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholics have maintained the early Christian view of the perpetual virginity of the Theotokos, while the opposite view has been taken since the 16th century by most Protestants. The phrase, therefore, "before they came together," could mean, "before they had sexual relations as husband and wife," in the Protestant view, or, in the traditional view, it simply refers to the fact that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit before Joseph publicly took Mary as his wife (Matthew 1:19-24). This has been the unbroken witness of the Church since the beginning on this passage.

- 442.** Further, in verses 24 and 25 of the same chapter, it says, "Then Joseph being raised from sleep did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife and knew her not till she had brought forth her first born son and called his name Jesus." Throughout the Bible whenever it indicates that a man knows a woman, it is always with the understanding that it is a physical relationship.

It is correct to interpret "know" in the manner in which you do. This issue, however, focuses on the word "till" or "until" in the phrase, "and

knew her not till she brought forth . . . ' The way the Protestants read this passage is that after Jesus was born, it is implied by the word "till" that Mary had marital relations with Joseph. But such is not the case at all. The Greek word translated by "till" is "eos." This word is frequently used in the Bible to describe actions or states which continue beyond the noted event. Thus, in Acts 2:34, it says, "The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand, till (eos) I make thy enemies a stool for thy feet." Certainly, this does not mean that Jesus will no longer be at the right hand of the throne of God when God's enemies are destroyed. Another example of this Greek language is Genesis 8:7 where it is said that Noah "sent forth a raven and it went forth to and fro until (eos) the waters dried up from the earth." Neither does this mean that the raven stopped flying after the waters dried up. Even Jesus is recorded as saying, in the same Gospel, "Lo, I am with you always to (eos) the end of the age" (Matthew 24:20). Obviously, this does not mean that Jesus will cease to be with His disciples after the end of this age. In fact, just the opposite is implied. These and other such passages were noted by both St. Jerome and St. John Chrysostom in explaining the meaning of this passage. Professor John Kalogerou of the University of Thessalonike explains that this phrase "simply indicated the time period in which the author wishes to emphasize that something occurred or did not occur. Its use does not indicate of necessity any change of condition following the designated period. It serves as a form of emphasis for the reality and the continuation of the event described before the use of the term 'eos.'" Matthew 1:25 is written as it is to emphasize that Jesus was born of a Virgin Mother. It should not be understood as implying anything more than that.

- 443. The Bible also says that Jesus was Mary's first born son. If this is so, then there must have been other children that followed as indicated in Matthew 13:55: "Is this not the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary, and his brethren James and Josés and Simon and Judas, and his sisters, are they not all with us?"**

In the Scriptures "first-born" is used in several ways. It can, of course, mean the first of a series of children, for example in Genesis 55:23. It can mean those who are greater and honored above all others as in Hebrews 12:23. It can refer, also, to the Son of God as the "first-born of all creation" (Colossians 1:15). It can also mean "first and only-begotten," as the passage in Matthew 1:25 and Luke 2:7 has always been understood in the history of the Church's tradition. As a result, references to brothers and sisters of Jesus have always been acknowledged in the tradition of referring to people closely related to Jesus, but not the children of Mary. Thus, St. James, the first Bishop of Jerusalem is honored with the impressive title of "Adelphotheos," that is, "Brother of God," but he was never understood to be Mary's son. According to very early accounts going back to the year 150 A.D. (The Protevangelion of James; Gospel of

Peter) and early writers such as Origen (died 252) it was accepted tradition that the "brethren of the Lord" were children of Joseph of his first wife who died before his engagement to the Virgin Mary. Writing in this early period, Origen contrasts the received teaching of the Church on this issue with any other possible interpretation. This view has been normative in Eastern Orthodoxy ever since. Many of the Fathers of the Church, such as Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine, in the West, and Athanasios, Ephiphanius, Chrysostom and Basil in the East taught this view, and rejected as false the opposite view. The continuous and unbroken teaching is that the Theotokos "conceived as Virgin, gave birth as a Virgin, and remained a Virgin" in the words of St. Augustine. Further, the canons of the 5th Ecumenical Council, the highest authority of the Church, proclaim the Theotokos as "ever Virgin" and condemn those who teach otherwise.

TRANSVESTITES

- 444. How does the Church feel about sex change operations? D. K., East Pittsburgh, PA.**

There is no official position on this subject. Generally speaking, however, the attitude in the Church parallels that of many responsible medical and psychiatric authorities, which does not encourage them. Several leading university hospitals have stopped doing these operations because, by and large, the deep seated psychological problems which are at the basis of requests for the operation are not generally resolved by it. For more on this subject, see Section Twenty-Five of my book, *Contemporary Moral Issues Facing the Orthodox Christian*.

TRIBULATION

- 445. To XYZ (Anonymous), Boston, MA.**

I read your letter and was deeply moved. You have had unusually difficult and painful experiences in life. So you ask if life is worth living and are tempted not to seek medical assistance for your chronic medical condition. You feel that nothing much can change anymore. And as a result, you are depressed. You may be right that the events of the past are beyond repair and that even the future of your external circumstances will not change too much. But the key is our own inner spiritual stance. There are three basic things that can change it all around for you. The first is to believe that even in your darkest moments, God is with you. The second is to